

Spectrum of Choices

Foods are neither good nor bad, but some are more healthful for you than others. You have a spectrum of choices.

Based on the latest science, while recognizing the limitations of research, I have categorized foods into a spectrum ranging from the most healthful (Group 1) to the least healthful (Group 5).

I started to say “most indulgent” to describe Group 5, but that’s part of the problem. Whether or not a food is healthful is not the primary determinant of how good it tastes. How fresh are the ingredients? Where was it grown? Local? Organic? How processed is it? How skillfully was it prepared?

You can make Group 1 and Group 2 foods that are good for you and also taste great and feel indulgent. Conversely, you can make Group 5 foods unappealing if they’re not well-prepared.

What matters most is your *overall* way of eating. I am not saying that you should never consume foods from Group 5 (unless you have a serious health condition). If you indulge yourself one day by eating foods from Group 4 or 5, spend a little more time in Groups 1 and 2 the next day.

If you get *on* a diet, chances are you’ll get *off* a diet. Sooner or later. For most people, being on a diet—*any* diet—is not sustainable.

Even the word “diet” conjures up feeling restricted, deprived, controlled—all the manipulative, fascist feelings that are not sustainable.

In contrast, the Spectrum approach is all about freedom and choice. There is no diet to get on and no diet to get off. Nothing is forbidden. No “Thou Shalt Not’s,” no “You Better!” No guilt, no shame; no right, no wrong.

The Spectrum is based on love, not willpower. It’s about feeling good, not just avoiding feeling bad. Joy of living, not fear of dying. Losing weight and gaining health. What’s sustainable is pleasure, feeling good, and freedom of choice.

OK, here’s how it works:

Find your place on the Spectrum based on the foods that you tend to eat most of the time. Then, according to your own needs and preferences, decide how far, and how quickly, you want to move in a more healthful direction (if at all). In general, the farther you move towards the Group 1 end of the Spectrum, and the faster you move there, the more benefits you’re likely to gain and the more quickly you’ll experience them.

It’s not all or nothing.

In my book, *The Spectrum*, I describe how you can use this nutrition spectrum for specific conditions—to lose weight, lower your blood pressure, decrease your cholesterol level, and to help prevent or even reverse the progression of diabetes, prostate cancer, breast cancer, and heart disease. Of course, the health benefits of making these changes are not limited to these illnesses; rather, these are examples of how powerful these changes may be.

In general, if you’re healthy and just want to stay that way, you may not need or want to make very many changes at all. If you’re trying to reverse heart disease, then you probably need to make much bigger changes than otherwise.

Foods in Group 1 are, in general, the most healthful. As Michael Pollan writes in the opening of one of his essays, “Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.”

Group 1 foods are predominantly fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, soy products, nonfat dairy, and egg whites in their natural forms, as well as some good fats that contain omega 3 fatty acids. These are the foods that are rich in good carbs, good fats, good proteins and other protective substances. There are at least 100,000 substances in these foods that have powerful anti cancer, anti-heart-disease and anti-aging properties.

Group 2 foods are also predominantly plant-based but somewhat higher in fat (predominantly monosaturated fat and polyunsaturated fat) such as avocados, seeds, nuts. Oils are included but in small amounts, since they are so dense in calories. Canola oil is a better choice than olive oil, as previously described, since canola oil contains some of the good omega 3 fatty acids and a better ratio of omega 6 fatty acids to omega 3 fatty acids than olive oil. Group 2 also includes foods canned in water (rather than sugary syrup), canned vegetables (if sodium is not too high), low-fat dairy (1 percent), decaffeinated beverages, low-sodium soy sauce, and so on.

Group 3 foods include some seafood, some refined carbohydrates and concentrated sweeteners (in moderation), some oils that are higher in saturated fat, oils that have a higher ratio of omega 6 fatty acids to omega 3 fatty acids, some reduced fat (2 percent) dairy products, margarines free of trans fatty acids, sweeteners containing high fructose corn syrup, and higher sodium.

In Group 3, I have given preference to seafood that is higher in omega 3 fatty acids, such as salmon. Anchovies are high in omega 3 fatty acids but also high in fat if packed in oil. Wild salmon tends to be lower in bad stuff (mercury, dioxin, PCB's) than farmed salmon, which should especially be avoided in pregnant and nursing women (although pregnant and nursing women should be sure to take omega 3 fatty acid supplements each day, which may make their babies smarter and healthier). The table below is a guide to the content of omega 3 fatty acids in various fish, recognizing that there will be some variability.

Remember, you don't have to eat fish to receive the omega 3 fatty acids. Three grams per day of most fish oil capsules contain about one gram of DHA + EPA, which is all that most people require. If you take fish oil capsules in which the bad stuff has been removed, then you receive the benefits of the omega 3 fatty acids without the potential toxicities. Also, vegetarian sources of omega 3 fatty acids are now available.

Group 4 foods contain additional fat, higher fat animal protein and fewer protective nutrients. These include poultry, fish that are higher in mercury, whole milk/dairy products, margarine, mayonnaise, doughnuts, fried rice, pastries, cakes, cookies, and pies.

Group 5 foods are, in general, the least healthful foods. They are the lowest in protective substances and are highest in "bad fats" (especially trans fatty acids and saturated fat). Group 5 foods include red meat in its various forms, egg yolks, fried poultry, fried fish, hot dogs, organ meats, butter, cream, and tropical oils.

If you're consuming red meat, look for brands that are organically raised in which the animals have been raised and slaughtered in ways designed to minimize the animal's suffering. Sometimes this information is on the label; other times you may need to go to their web site if you're interested. Compared with natural grass-fed animals, meat from animals raised in feedlots contains more total fat, saturated fat, cholesterol and calories. It also has less vitamin E, beta carotene, vitamin C, and omega-3 fatty acids.

I put "bad carbs" in Group 3 and "bad fats" in Group 5 because the harmful effects of bad carbs can be offset by consuming them in a meal along with good carbs and other high-fiber foods that have a low glycemic index and glycemic load. In contrast, the unhealthful effects of consuming too much saturated fat and trans fatty acids are not mitigated as much by consuming these with more healthful foods. Eating too many "bad carbs" on an empty stomach puts them in Group 5.

The Spectrum of Food Choices Table is just a guide. Other factors can change a food's category, including the type of food, the amount of food, and other foods it's consumed with.

For example, you can turn a healthy food into an unhealthy one if you eat too much of it. A little olive oil belongs in Group 2, but pouring it over your pasta and dipping your bread in it will move it to Group 3 or even Group 4 due to the excessive calories, saturated fat, and omega-6 fatty acids from eating so much of it. Margarine made out of canola oil is healthier than margarine made out of oils high in trans fatty acids and saturated fat. A little dark chocolate every day may lower your blood pressure, but eating a lot of chocolate gives you a large amount of sugar, calories, and saturated fat. A tiny sliver of butter may be healthier than a large scoop of margarine. You may want to explore alternatives to both.

In general, choose smaller portion sizes if you're trying to lose weight, lower your cholesterol or blood pressure, or reverse the progression of a chronic disease than if you just want to continue to stay healthy. If you're going to eat more indulgent foods, have them with healthier ones.

As I've said, it's not all or nothing. When we eat more of our foods on the healthier end of the Spectrum, it makes us feel better. It also does less violence, helps reduce global warming, and frees up more arable land to grow food for those who most need it. In short, it's the healthiest way to eat both for us and for our planet.

We all need to find our place on the food spectrum that's comfortable and congruent with our own personal values as well as with our health needs. And it may evolve, or devolve, over time. The point of the spectrum is to provide you information that you can use to make informed and intelligent choices.

But this I know for sure: only you can decide what's right for you. Only then is it sustainable.

[Click here for the Spectrum of Food Choices](#)

Nutrition Guidelines For Reversing Heart Disease

Fat — No more than 10% of calories are from fat. This is achieved by not adding any fats, oils, seeds, nuts, avocados, coconut and olives to a mostly plant-based diet. The 10% of calories from fat comes from fat that occurs naturally in grains, vegetables, fruit, beans, legumes and soy foods.

Cholesterol — No more than 10 milligrams of cholesterol per day. To meet this goal, non-fat dairy products are limited to 2 servings per day. Non-fat dairy products are optional. Soy products can be used instead of dairy products because they are cholesterol free.

Animal Products — Meat, poultry, fish and any products made from these foods are eliminated. Non-fat dairy foods (no more than 2 servings/day) and egg whites are included.

Calories — Unrestricted unless weight loss is desired. Small frequent meals spread throughout the day help avoid hunger and keep energy levels constant. Portion control will assist in reaching and maintaining a healthy body weight and controlling blood sugar levels.

Sugar — Permitted in moderation. No more than 2 servings/day including non-fat sweets. A serving is equivalent to 1 tablespoon or 12 grams of sugar.

Caffeine — All sources of caffeine are eliminated, including regular and decaffeinated coffees and teas, chocolate, cocoa, and regular or decaffeinated dark colas, **with the exception of green tea**. Caffeine's effect on the central nervous system interferes with the mind body connection and therefore meditation and relaxation. **Why is green tea an exception?** Evidence from recent studies on tea shows that the health benefits of green tea outweigh the risks for most individuals. Green tea contains a variety of powerful antioxidants called polyphenols, especially the flavonoids such as catechins, which may reduce the risk of many chronic diseases. *Individuals with arrhythmia and elevated stress should still avoid any caffeinated beverage.* Although green tea contains some caffeine and its caffeine content is lower than that found in coffee, black or oolong teas and caffeinated cola soft drinks, it should be **limited to no more than 2 cups per day**. Additionally, decaffeinated green tea can be consumed. Be sure to purchase green tea that has been decaffeinated with the "effervescence" method (uses water and carbon dioxide), which preserves most of the polyphenols present in regular green tea. Naturally caffeine-free herbal teas, grain-based coffees (i.e. Postum, Caffix and Roma), carob powder, Sprite, 7-Up or Ginger Ale are also good alternatives. For more information on the benefits of green tea, see Dr. Ornish's recent column, **Touting Tea**.

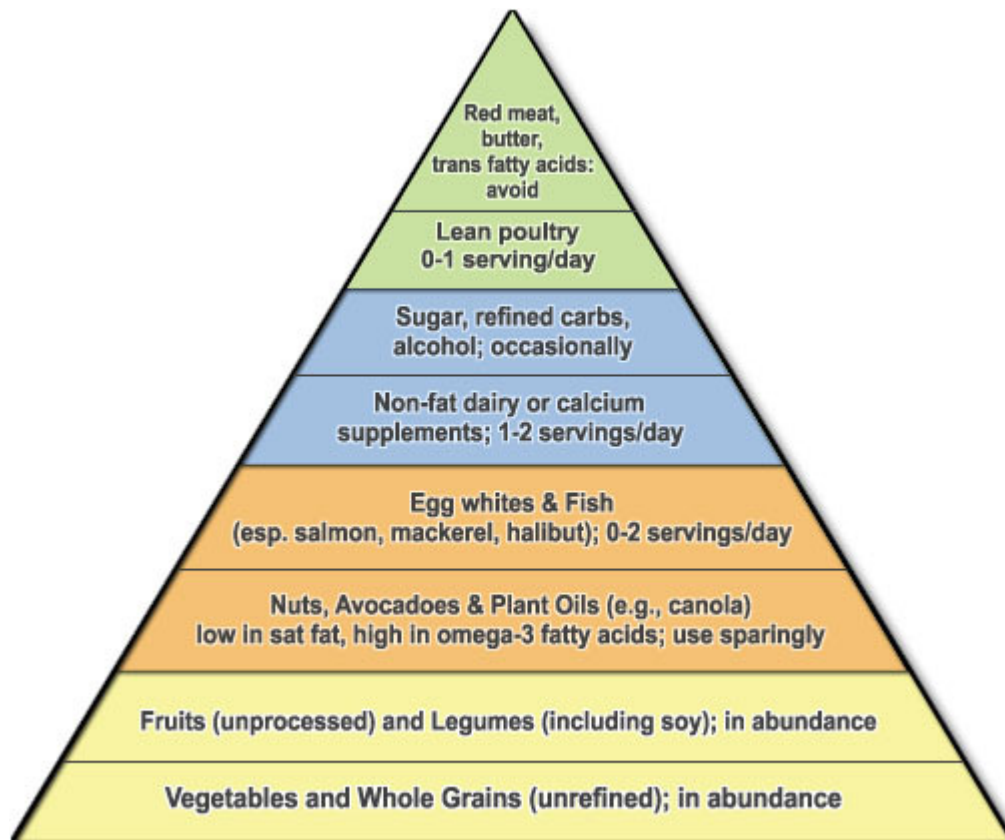
Sodium — Moderate salt use, unless medically indicated otherwise.

Alcohol — Allowed in small amounts but not encouraged. If consumed, enjoy one serving a day: 1.5 ounces liquor, 4 ounces wine or 12 ounces beer.

Soy — One serving per day of a “full-fat” soy food. A full-fat soy food is one that contains greater than 3 grams of fat per serving, with none of the fat coming from added fats or oils. Always read the label for portion sizes and ingredient content.

Supplements — A low dose multivitamin and mineral supplement with B-12 (without iron, if not of childbearing age), fish oil and, possibly upon the advice of a physician, calcium supplements. Antioxidant vitamins and folic acid are optional and are based on health history and nutritional intake of these nutrients.

Prevention Food Guide Pyramid



Moderate exercise, stress management techniques, social support, a multivitamin, and 3 grams/day of fish oil to provide omega-3 fatty acids are also recommended for most people. Fresh, organic produce is optimal.

Source:

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This pyramid is a visual representation of Dr. Ornish's dietary recommendations. The foundation of this diet comes from whole, unrefined plant-based foods, as close as possible to their original state. These are whole grains such as whole wheat and brown rice, fresh fruits and vegetables, and legumes (beans, peas, lentils), including soy. These foods provide carbohydrates, protein, fiber, vitamins and minerals and an immense variety of disease-fighting chemicals found only in plant foods (phytochemicals, where phyto = plant), which may help protect us from chronic diseases such as heart disease and cancer.

The bottom two layers of the pyramid, with the addition of 1-2 servings of egg whites and non-fat dairy products, characterize the stricter version of Dr. Ornish diet, meant for people who have heart disease and want to reverse it.

Healthy individuals, who want to prevent disease and achieve or maintain a healthy weight, can add the top layers to the foundation of the pyramid. These include:

- Higher fat-foods, such as nuts and avocados and plant oils low in saturated fat and high in omega-3 fatty acids (e.g. canola oil) can be added occasionally.
- Fish can also be enjoyed in small amounts, especially the varieties rich in omega-3 fatty acids, such as salmon, mackerel, and halibut. Alternatively, one can consume fish oil capsules, and enjoy the benefits of omega-3 fats (decreased risk of sudden cardiac death, lower triglycerides, reduced inflammation (e.g., arthritis) and lower risk of some cancers), without the contaminants that may be present in fish, such as mercury, PCB's, and dioxin.
- Non-fat dairy products and egg whites can be included to provide excellent-quality protein and important vitamins
- Lean poultry can be added occasionally if a vegetarian diet is not acceptable, as it provides very little additional fat and saturated fat.

Simple carbohydrates such as sugar and white flour are limited in a whole-food diet. These foods are low in fiber, and provide calories that don't make us feel full, and they get absorbed quickly, causing blood sugar to spike and insulin surges that may cause us to gain weight. Equally important, refined carbohydrates are deprived of many of the vitamins, minerals, and health-promoting phytochemicals present in their unrefined versions.

Red meat and trans-fatty acids are excluded. Red meat is rich in artery-clogging saturated fat and has been linked with an increased risk of cancer. Trans-fatty acids have been found to be equivalent, or possibly worse than, saturated fat in increasing the risk for heart disease.

What this pyramid visualizes is not a "diet" in the common use of the word – one that is followed for a short period of time and then abandoned because it is too difficult to maintain. Dr. Ornish approach, on the other hand, is to embrace a dietary lifestyle that offers a spectrum of choices. If we look at our food choices each day as part of a spectrum of choices, then we feel free rather than constrained. If we indulge ourselves one day, we can eat more healthfully the next. To the degree we move in this direction on the food spectrum, we may lose weight, feel better, and gain health.

Nutrition Supplement Recommendations

Recommended:

Multivitamin with Minerals

1 per day, with vitamin B12 (2.4 micrograms/day), without iron (unless woman of childbearing age or prescribed by your physician), providing 100% RDA.

Fish Oil

Fish oil supplements vary in their eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) content. Aim for a dosage that includes approximately 600 mg EPA and 400 mg DHA per day. This dosage is usually found in 3 grams of fish oil in capsule form per day.

Strict vegetarians may opt to take flaxseed oil capsules or ground flaxseed. However, this is not the general recommendation, as the omega-3 fatty acids in flaxseed are not as bioavailable as those in fish oil. Flaxseed is not recommended for men, as some studies have indicated that there may be an increased risk of prostate cancer for men with high intakes of alpha-linolenic acid, the omega-3 fatty acid present in flaxseed.

Warning: people who have recurrent angina, congestive heart failure, or evidence that the heart is not receiving enough blood flow when exercising *should not take omega-3 fatty acids* (fish oil), as taking fish oil may *increase* the risk of sudden cardiac death for people with these conditions. For more information see Dr. Ornish's recent column, **The Dark Side of Good Fats.**

Omega-3 fatty acid supplements are available at most retail stores, health food stores and local grocery stores. Select brands that have toxic substances removed such as mercury, PCB, dioxin, etc. Products with "liver" in their title, such as cod liver oil, are not appropriate. Fish oil supplements should not contain cholesterol.

Participants are encouraged to check with their physician before taking any vitamin, mineral or herbal supplement.

Optional

(Choose food sources first for these nutrients)

Vitamin C: 1-3 grams per day

Vitamin E: 100 International Units per day (Check with your physician if taking statin medications)

Folic Acid: 400-1000 mcg per day

Selenium: 100-200 mcg per day

Food Label Guidelines

These guidelines can be used to determine if a packaged food (other than full-fat soy products) fits within the guidelines of the Dr. Dean Ornish reversal eating plan. Please refer to the Nutrition Facts label on the food package, and follow these guidelines:

1. Look at the nutrient analysis section of the label.

- Check the serving size listed on the label to determine what 1 serving is defined as. All nutrition information is based on 1 serving of this product, not the entire package.
- Look at the "Total Fat" content of the food. Does the food contain less than or equal to three grams of fat per serving? If greater than 3 grams of fat, reject this product and find a better option. If less than or equal to three grams of fat per serving, check the ingredient list to see where the fat is coming from before selecting.

2. Read the ingredient list.

- Reject any food that contains any quantity of hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated fats as an ingredient.
- Reject any food that contains ingredients that are not allowed on the Dr. Dean Ornish nutrition plan, such as whole or low-fat cheeses, whole eggs, other animal products, or unacceptable added fats or oils.
- If there is a trace amount of an acceptable, unsaturated fat listed at or near the end of the ingredient list, **0 to 3 servings per day** can be included within the context of a well balanced, plant-based diet. Remember to check the serving size to determine what 1 serving is.

3. Determine if the trace amount of added fat or added oil is an acceptable fat.

- Ornish friendly foods that have 0 grams of fat per serving may contain an acceptable fat or oil anywhere in the list of ingredients. (Total of 0-3 servings per day)

Source: <http://www.pmri.org/spectrum/lifestyle-program.html#nutrition>